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ABSTRACT

Using 400 autobiographical accounts offered by third graders, this study examined children's inner lives. Subjects were a stratified (by gender and by ethnicity at each school) random sample from eight elementary schools in a large urban Midwestern school district. The autobiographical sample analyzed consisted of information from 144 African American students (86 female and 58 male), 46 Caucasian students (32 female and 14 male), and 11 Hispanic students (7 female and 4 male). Findings include the following: (1) children want to do well in school--girls especially associate a sense of accomplishment with academics; (2) Hispanic and Caucasian students associated more negative thoughts with school more so than did African American students; (3) self-esteem seemed not to be an issue since most students would not change themselves or their family and self-esteem is tied to academic, physical, and social competence; (4) when asked about how they might change the world, regardless of race, students hoped to decrease violence; (5) students expressed a need for their own personal space at home; (6) family concerns were greatest among Hispanic students; (7) students were most afraid of death; and (8) students regarded math and language arts as being most important to their future; and finally, (9) students' goals were fairly well-defined with sports being in the future for all except the girls who envisioned themselves in the arts. Contains 17 references. (JW)

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Getting to Know Third-Graders

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Introduction

The research presented here provides a glimpse into the inner lives of young students in order to illuminate for the classroom teacher some of the hidden influences on students' behavior. Who are these young people in our classrooms? Structured autobiographies provide a means of obtaining answers to these questions and offer a window into the psychological character of the student.

Methods

Sample

Eight (of 45) elementary schools from an urban school district in a large midwestern city participated in the study. All third-graders from each of the eight schools participated in the project. Seven were magnet theme schools (three communications and writing, four visual and performing arts) and one was a traditional school.

Four-hundred autobiographies were returned and most were complete. A stratified (by gender and ethnicity at each school) random sample of one-third of the completed autobiographies from each school was selected. The autobiography sample analyzed comprised 144 African-American (86 female and 58 male), 46 Caucasian (32 female and 14 male), and 11 Hispanic (7 female and 4 male) third-grade students. This article reports the findings by gender and race.

The counseling and child psychology literature was searched for developmentally appropriate questions to include in the autobiography. The final form of the autobiography borrowed from the presentation style and content segments of several creative guides (Farnette, Forte, and Loss, 1989; Mannix, D. ,1989; Smith-Martenz, Cooper, and Leverte, 1977; Stanish, 1988). The autobiography was seven pages in length in which the students were asked to draw a picture of themselves, to write about their favorite activities, wishes, dreams; least favorite thoughts; talents, skills and accomplishments; school time; how they felt about their teacher; changes they would like to make in their home, themselves and the world; and things they did not want to change.

Procedure

The autobiography packet was distributed to the third-grade teachers in late January, 1994 and were picked up at the end of April,

1994. The three months given to complete the project allowed the teachers to incorporate the autobiography into their regular instruction so that the project would not displace other work. Instructions were given to the teachers asking them to have someone other than themselves present the packet to the students and, if possible, to guide them through the project. The teachers were asked not to read the autobiographies and to inform the students that he/she would not be reading them. This was intended to give the students a sense of freedom in their responses. Further, the teachers assisted the project by providing identifying data on each autobiography, specifically student number, ethnic code, school, and grade-level.

Results

Categories were derived from the student responses through emergent category recognition procedures of qualitative data analysis (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). The frequency of the occurrence of like responses helped in the formulation of categories in that like responses which occurred with a relatively high frequency became a category. For example, in response to the question asking about their favorite wish, many students wrote something about being rich and famous. The response was entered originally as the student wrote it. Since many students gave a similar response, the category "rich/famous" was created for the autobiographical question about their favorite wish.

To facilitate a psychological interpretation of the behaviors represented in the student responses, the autobiographical questions were collected into four psychological dimensions: Self-Image; Fears; Idealistic/Hypothetical Thinking; Considering the Future. The differences in student responses to each question are discussed within the appropriate dimension and the categories characterizing each question are ranked according to the frequency of occurrence by sex and race.

Self-Image

The prevalence of academics in this psychological dimension is in agreement with theories of personality denial postulated by Freud (1973) and Erikson (1950). Freud felt that tasks of childhood take precedence over any sexual desire which is apparent in earlier and later stages. Erickson, while not focusing on sexuality, felt that children this age tend to be industrious particularly with respect to school work. Our data further agree with the literature in that girls are more conforming to

adults and peers than are boys beginning in preschool (Block, 1976; Macoby & Jacklin, 1974).

An accomplishment I did was:

Compared to other questions, responses here varied. Boys, who are more physical (Cummings, Iannotti, and Zahn-Waxler, 1985), gained a sense of accomplishment through sports and girls through academics. Improving behavior was noteworthy for girls, but not for boys. Being recognized in some way was noteworthy for boys, but not for girls. Among the races, sports consistently ranked second. However, ranking first for African-Americans and Hispanics was academic skills whereas Caucasians ranked arts skill first.

I'm best at:

Of the groups examined, only the girls did not rank sports first. The category academics ranked first among girls. All groups, except Hispanic students, ranked academics at least second (African-American students showed a tie for first rank between sports and academics). Arts ranked second among Hispanics. It seems that, although Hispanic students overwhelmingly associated a sense of accomplishment through academics, only 18% felt they were "best" in an academic area.

Skills, talents, and abilities I have:

The skills, talents, and abilities third-grade students attributed to themselves were similar to those responses given to the "accomplishment" and "best at" questions: sports, arts, and academics. The was little difference in responses by sex or race.

One way I improve is by:

Interestingly, rankings did not differ by sex or race. The highest ranking response was practice/trying harder, followed by behave better, and, thirdly, study.

Changes in myself:

Clear sex differences emerged in the response to this question. Girls most wanted to change their physical appearance, and the change most frequently involved their hair, face, or body. Boys most wanted to change their behavior, with physical appearance ranking second. Being smarter ranked third for both boys and girls. Interestingly, a slightly higher percentage of girls (4%) than boys (1%) wanted to change nothing.

Regardless of race, the highest ranking response involved a change in behavior. Ranking equal to behavior among Hispanic students was being smarter, a category that ranked third among African-Americans and

Caucasians. Physical change ranked higher among African-American and Caucasian students than Hispanic.

Things I would not change:

Many responses to this category were specific to the individual responding and could not be reliably placed into a topical category. As a result, the category "other" achieved high rankings in this question. Of the categories which could be formed from the responses, family and self ranked the highest. It is of interest to note that Hispanic and Caucasians students ranked family first while African-American students ranked self first.

Idealistic/Hypothetical Thinking

Children are really just beginning to think logically and realistically in third-grade. When they make attempts at idealistic thinking, they still typically give either familiar situations with which they have had experiences (i.e., going to amusement parks, etc.), or fairly farfetched "storybook-type" responses (i.e., wanting all the money in the world, etc.). According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969), these children still think concretely and are bound in their thinking by their own experiences.

A favorite wish is:

Regardless of gender or race, the category being rich/famous ranked highest among the third-graders. The category family ranked second only among Hispanics. Categories having more or some aspect of self-improvement ranked second among both sexes and among African-American and Caucasians.

A favorite day-dream is:

The category self-improve ranked highest among all groups (gender and race), except Hispanics. The category family/home ranked highest among Hispanics. Being rich or having more ranked second among boys, African-Americans, and Caucasians. Among Hispanics, trips, social awareness, self-improve, and rich/having more all ranked second; among girls, trips ranked first along with self-improve. Considering the category trips, which was in the top three rankings among all groups, the findings suggest that being some place else is a more frequent daydream among girls and Hispanics. Are these findings indicating that girls and Hispanics feel more confined and constrained than do boys, African-Americans, and Caucasians? There is some evidence that this might be true (at least for the girls) in that boys are allowed to range farther from home

unsupervised than are girls (Newson and Newson, 1976).

The majority of the day dreams involving trips were to a local spot such as Discovery Zone, Worlds of Fun, Cool Crest, a mall, or a park. The responses to the autobiographies suggest that such trips would be powerful incentives to some of these thirds-graders.

Changes in my home:

Numerous categories were generated from the student responses, but three dominated the rankings. Having their own room ranked highest among all groups, expect Hispanics. Changing the rules (in their favor) or having more toys, games, etc. ranked highest among Hispanic students. The latter category ranked second or third among the other groups (Caucasians tied in this category with having their own room).

Students did not focus on interpersonal issues which is normal for this age. However, some mention was made of interpersonal concerns, with boys more so than girls wanting fewer fights and arguments at home. Typically, boys are more negatively affected by household discord and divorce than are girls.

The need for their own space does not seem to be as strong among Hispanic students as it is among the others. The simple need for these third-graders to have a space of their own space could be addressed in the school by allotting a particular space for each child. Perhaps, having lockers at this age would be a way of meeting this need.

Changes in the world:

Excluding Caucasian students, the category involving violence ranked highest among the groups. Caucasians placed environmental concerns above violence. Significantly, these third-graders see a need for less violence in the world. Teachers could channel this perspective into learning projects to lessen violence in their community.

Fears

The fact that these students understood this question indicates a developmental milestone. They can now think about what they do not want to think about, which suggests that they can somewhat control their thinking. Thinking about thinking is termed metacognition and usually occurs around eight or nine years of age (Pillow, 1988). The predominant fear involved death. Fear of more realistic things begins around seven to eight years of age and becomes well developed between nine and twelve years (DeAngelis, 1991; Morris and Kratochivill, 1983). Before, it was the

"boogey man", but now mention of specifics such as war, violence, AIDS, and so forth are common.

I don't like to think about:

The category death ranked highest among boys, girls, and African-American students. The categories school and bad/scary things ranked second or third among all groups, except Hispanics. School ranked first among Caucasians and death ranked second; among Hispanics, school and bad/scary things tied for first. Again, greater variability was found in the responses of Hispanics students due to the smaller sample size and there were several ties among category rankings for this reason.

The response patternings in two categories are of interest even though they did not rank in the top three categories. A larger percentage of boys than girls did not like to think about drugs, guns, and alcohol. Also, no Caucasian students mentioned fights/violence whereas many African-American male students did. A plausible interpretation could be that the African-American third-graders had more real threats of death and danger in their environment compared to Caucasian children.

Considering the Future

Subject most important to my future:

Math ranked highest among all groups, except Caucasians who placed language arts first. The Hispanic students and the girls showed a tie for first between math and language arts. The was no consistent patterning among the rankings other than just described. Science, physical education, or no subject were ranked variously as second or third among the groups. Not surprising (and in support of the responses to the next question), boys felt physical education was more important to their future than did the girls.

A future goal is:

Again, sports ranked highest among all groups, except girls who placed arts first. Lower rankings varied greatly among groups. The most consistent pattern was seen in the category "good person" which ranked second among girls, African-American, and Hispanic students.

Boys seemed to have more distinct role model to aspire to - a sports figure being the most often expressed. Yet, boys also wrote of being a city worker, specifically a policeman, fireman, or detective. Girls were not as specific (e.g., dancer) and spoke more generally of being a good person more than boys. It seemed the girls' goals, in being more

diffuse and less definitive, could reflect a lack of female role models.

Summary

The responses suggest a psychological profile of these third-graders and suggest areas which teachers may explore in order to reach them for effectively. A summary of the findings within the four psychological dimensions is as follows:

Self-Image

- Kids this age want to do well in school. Most students, girls especially, associated a sense of accomplishment with academics. If this association is personality denial, girls are more in denial than boys.
- Interestingly, although most Hispanic students felt accomplishment through academics, far fewer felt they were "best" at it. Findings suggest that both Caucasians and Hispanics did not perceive school as welcoming a place as did African-American students. (Both, Hispanics and Caucasians associated negative thoughts with school more so than did the African-American students.)
- Kids this age want to be noticed. Receiving recognition in school gave them a sense of accomplishment, and offers teachers a way of building a self-esteem in students.
- Self-esteem seemed not to be an issue since most students would not change themselves or their family. Also, self-esteem is tied to academic, physical, and social competence between the ages of 6-10 years. It may drop as children begin to compare themselves with others, but goes back up as they accomplish things (Beck, 1994).
- When asked about what they would change in themselves, regardless of race, the changed involved wanting to behave better. Girls wanted most to change their appearance and boys their behavior.

Idealistic/Hypothetical Thinking

- The third-graders want more things, most especially trips, which could be as simple as going to a local park or play area. Such trips offer a ready and inexpensive incentive to teachers.
- Changes in their world typically involved less violence. The concern was especially strong among African-American students. Only the Caucasian students placed another concern (the environment) above violence. There is a need to constructively discuss violence in the community and how best to deal with it emotionally and

psychologically.

- Most students expressed a need for their own personal space at home. Space was not a concern of Hispanic students who felt a change at home should be giving them more control or more things.
- Hispanic students seemed more secure in their family than in themselves compared to Caucasians African-Americans. Hispanic students typically expressed greater concern for family than African-Americans and Whites. The greater emphasis on family expressed consistently by the Hispanic students may be related to the maintenance of cultural traditions and the contact with extended family (Harrison, et.al. 1990).

Fears

- What did students not like to think about? Death. All students ranked death high although the rankings suggest that Caucasians and Hispanics may be slightly less affected by death than African-Americans.

Future

- Considering their future, most students believed math and language arts were the subjects most important to their future. They felt they could improve though practice and trying harder. Finally, their goals were fairly well defined with sports being in the future for all except the girls who envisioned themselves in the arts.

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